

## Your details

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**Title**

Ms

**First name**

Sonja

**Last name**

Elwood

## Submission details

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**I am making this submission as**

Other

**Submission type**

I am making a personal submission

**Consent to make submission public**

I give my consent for this submission to be made public

## Share your experience or tell your story

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**Your story**

This is my personal experience of the 2019-20 NSW bushfires. This submission has been put together hurriedly and is by no means complete. I have known that I needed to write up this experience for other purposes since it happened but it remains a lot to process and with the advent of the Covid-19 crisis has been pushed to one side. I did not realise until a day ago that this inquiry was closing and find myself in the uncomfortable position that I need to produce something quickly so I apologise in advance as this is more an outpouring of thoughts than a structured report due to time constraints. Firstly, as a bit of background about myself I am:

- A volunteer wildlife rescuer and carer of more than 30 years licensed by the NSW Dept. Planning, Infrastructure and Environment (formerly the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage);
- A qualified ecologist and environmental educator of more than 20 years (B. Env. Sci, M.Wildlife Mgmt., M.Res. (Sci));

- Founder and active member of Sydney Metropolitan Wildlife Services Inc. (Sydney Wildlife). Sydney Wildlife is a licensed entirely voluntary charitable wildlife rescue organisation that has been in operation since early 1997 and rescues up to 15,000 native animals per year across the greater Sydney metropolitan area with a membership of approximately 500 authorised and trained volunteer rescuers and carers.
- A founding member of the NSW Wildlife Council (NWC), and currently a member of the executive in the role of Media Officer. I also represent Sydney Wildlife on the NWC. The NWC is the peak body for wildlife rehabilitation in NSW and represents 26 licensed wildlife rescue groups across the state (excluding the NSW Wildlife Information Rescue and Education Service Inc. (WIRES)). Our combined membership totals approximately 4,000 volunteers representing just over 50% of all licensed wildlife carers in the state. Our network operates almost entirely voluntarily with no paid staff, and is funded solely by donations from the community. This is a link to the NWC webpage listing member groups and regions of operation in NSW: <https://www.nwc.org.au/resources/injured-wildlife-find-your-nearest-rescue-group/>

The fires began in the northern part of the state in August 2019. Between August and December as more and more wild fires continued to spring up and spread across multiple areas of the state gradually more and more wildlife rescue groups were impacted until almost 90% of all NWC member groups were with in fire zones.

Member groups in the north of NSW, once the fires subsided, immediately mobilised as best they could to set up feeding programs and water stations in fire devastated areas and attempted to get permission to undertake search and rescue black walks to locate injured wildlife which was largely denied in government-managed lands such as state forests and national parks despite a number of carers trained to do so. These efforts were therefore largely undertaken on private lands.

As media officer and an executive committee member of the NWC and sitting in the relative safety of Sydney I realise I was in a rather unique position to witness all this unfold. Over this period (Aug-Dec 2019) communications between groups and members became difficult as volunteers lost power, internet services, and/or were forced to evacuate their homes and properties. At the same time, I was inundated by hundreds of messages, enquiries and communications from concerned members of the public and groups from both within Australia and around the world on the NWC's social media platforms and website. Other volunteers managing these platforms for Sydney Wildlife also reported they too were being inundated with messages and were struggling to cope. Although I was working every day at my paid employment, I was coming home every night and working til 2 or 3am every day to try and keep up. The same was reported by volunteers in many other groups trying to manage the same thing across the state.

As founder of Sydney Wildlife I became increasingly concerned over these weeks for the volunteers in my own organisation should the fires come to Sydney. Throughout December I approached a number of local councils and land-managers seeking assistance should members living near bushland need to evacuate their homes with the wildlife in care. Primarily I was hoping that community halls or land might have been made available to Sydney Wildlife members to house excess native animals. My requests were largely turned down with authorities citing that wildlife and the wildlife sector were not included in emergency incident response planning (although domestic animals are included and areas allocated for their evacuation if the need arises). Finally I approached the NSW Scouts Association who, to my absolute relief, very kindly and rapidly contacted their Sydney regional directors and within a week of this request I had a number of their halls and grounds made available for wildlife should bushfires start in Sydney.

Within the organisation, Sydney Wildlife, with the assistance of the RFS put a number of members through the RFS Bushfire Awareness training to enable members to undertake black walks in fire grounds to look for injured wildlife should the need arise in Sydney. Our managing board and senior members within our branches encouraged fellow members living near bushland to develop their own personal evacuation plans and to ensure they had enough cages, equipment and transport available to enable themselves and the wildlife in their care to leave quickly if the need arose.

Over the Christmas and New Year period the wild fires on the south coast escalated further. Whole communities and townships were evacuated and displaced. On New Year's Eve two wildlife carers on the south coast almost lost

their lives defending their property and wildlife in their care (and are still recovering in hospital today).

It was during this time, and most fortuitously, that Sydney Wildlife's newly constructed mobile wildlife clinic came off the production line. It was immediately stocked with medical supplies and staffed with highly experienced wildlife volunteers and local Sydney wildlife vets who kindly and without hesitation volunteered their services. Simultaneously, in the absence of any assistance from government, on behalf of the NWC, I accepted the offers of three international animal disaster emergency response groups from New Zealand (Helping You Help Animals New Zealand HUHANZ), Canada (Pattisons Search and Rescue Canada) and Germany (Animal Emergency Disaster Response Germany) who had been messaging me with offers of assistance in the previous few weeks.

On the 11th of January, Sydney Wildlife's mobile clinic with the assistance of these international groups, and also Aussie Mobile Vets and Vets Beyond Borders, established an emergency triage centre for wildlife on a carers property in Wandandian on the south coast of NSW to assist NWC member and sister groups Wildlife Rescue South Coast (WRSC) and the Native Animal Rescue Group (NARG) with injured wildlife in the region.

It became immediately apparent that we also needed the assistance of qualified and licensed darters and shooters to capture injured animals needing treatment and to also end the suffering of animals who were beyond help. To this end, I contacted the Firearms Safety and Training Council and requested they email their membership on our behalf to find people that might consider volunteering their time for us to assist our cause. This organisation responded immediately in the positive and within a day I had a register of people who put their hands up to help. Once the local community realised we were there and what we were doing requests for assistance for injured wildlife began coming in from the local community, RFS officers, national park rangers etc. Local wildlife carers and indeed many members of the entire community up and down the south coast also began establishing feeding and water station programs to support surviving wildlife on private properties and sanctuaries. Many international groups assisted in these efforts for weeks. These international groups donated large amounts of money for supplies, food, materials and also flew in volunteers to help rebuild wildlife rehabilitation infrastructure on carers properties.

Sydney Wildlife's mobile clinic a week later then headed to the Blue Mountains and set up a second triage centre there with the assistance of Vets with Compassion, Aussie Mobile Vets and Dr. Howard Ralph and his team from Southern Cross Wildlife Care (a charitable organisation that provides free veterinary assistance to wildlife).

HUHA-NZ went from Wandandian to Cooma immediately after the tragic crash of the water bomber that was defending Two Thumbs Koala and Wildlife Sanctuary to assist carers in Wildcare Queanbeyan and Looking After Our Kosciuszko Orphans (LAOKO Wildlife Rescue Monaro and Snowy Mountains).

Despite a flooding disaster that then occurred in New Zealand and the request of the New Zealand government for HUHA-NZ's help at home – HUHA-NZ immediately recruited more volunteers and expanded their resources and operations to ensure they could continue to assist wildlife and wildlife carers in NSW whilst simultaneously also attending the flooding disaster in NZ.

Once Cooma was established HUHA-NZ moved on to Cathcart and then again to Bredbo – in each location providing the materials and the volunteer builders to establish new triage centres. These activities were funded by the kind donations of the New Zealand people.

Vets and vet nurses were gathered very quickly along the way and roster systems established to ensure emergency centres were manned with medical staff. The kindness and enormous amount of work undertaken by these people (which still continues in some areas today) was and remains outstanding and extraordinary. Vets either volunteered as individuals or volunteered through organisations such as Vets Beyond Borders, Vets for Compassion, the Humane Society International, Dr Howard Ralph and Southern Cross Wildlife Care, Aussie Mobile Vets, universities with veterinary staff, and vets with experience with wildlife in private practice dropped everything to come and assist. The assistance and kindness from the international groups and the funding they provided I cannot estimate. HUHA-NZ in particular were extraordinary and their last volunteers didn't leave Australia until hours before NZ was closing its borders due to the Covid-19 crisis.

I personally took almost two months off work, Jan and Feb 2020, to assist as much as I could helping set up triage areas and once these were established and local carers took over their management, I went onto to organising rebuild projects with assistance from organisations such as Wildlife Rescue and Recovery, Animal Rescue Cooperative and the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) who have donated so much in the way of materials, and with the volunteer manpower of members of Sydney Wildlife. Unfortunately due to the arrival of Covid-19 these

activities have now been shelved until safe to resume.

The key point of my story and personal experience in these bushfires – and doing my best to represent as many people, organisations, aspects and MOST importantly our native wildlife are that wildlife and the volunteer wildlife rehabilitation sector should be included in emergency incident management planning (as various wildlife groups, including Sydney Wildlife, and the NWC have requested of DPI more than once over the past 8 or so years). This should occur for three main reasons:

- (i) Our native fauna and wildlife carers need and deserve emergency assistance during these types of disasters.
- (ii) Wildlife carers WILL provide emergency assistance irrespective of whether formal assistance is received from the government and/or other emergency services or not (this was clearly demonstrated in the 2019-20 bushfires by the NSW Wildlife Council's member groups, and many wildlife carers across NSW by the setting up of emergency triage areas). This may place wildlife carers at greater risk in an emergency such as a bushfire as they may linger too long or remain on a property to protect the animals in their care.
- (iii) The provision of emergency services for native wildlife is EXPECTED by the wider community during these type of emergencies. This was clearly demonstrated by the enormous outpouring of materials, resources and financial donations from both the Australian people and indeed from many people and organisations across a multitude of nations around the world and the number of international NGOs, vets, and animal emergency disaster crews that flew into Australia to provide assistance for our native fauna and wildlife carers.

Further points for consideration include:

- (iv) The provision of special leave for wildlife carers from their employment to assist with injured wildlife in times of disaster – similar to the leave that volunteer RFS fire fighters are currently afforded.
- (v) Post fire search and rescue operations need to be pre-planned and undertaken in both national parks and on private lands and more wildlife carers trained for this.
- (vi) Formalised, planned and funded emergency feeding/water programs for wildlife need to be undertaken on both private property AND in national parks – it is somewhat flabbergasting that to this day this has not been undertaken in our national parks, thus leaving surviving animals to die of their injuries or starve to death.
- (vii) That after such an event as this, pre-planned recovery programs should commence immediately to ensure remaining intact forest, regenerating forest and surviving wildlife is supported and protected. Conversely any potential further threats should be identified, mitigated or halted if necessary, to ensure forest/wildlife regeneration and sustainability in national parks, state forests and private land. For example, after fires of this scale, moratoriums should perhaps be placed on logging operations in remaining intact forests and salvage-logging in burnt-out forests until we know what we have left, how much and where. As a second example, perhaps moratoriums should be placed on the shooting or culling of native species e.g. Eastern Grey Kangaroos until a thorough assessment has been made of population numbers and dynamics.
- (viii) That programs for recovery should also include ongoing assistance post fire/disaster to ensure wildlife carers infrastructure is restored as quickly as possible so they can in-turn can provide emergency wildlife care in their area as quickly as possible. Wildlife rehabilitation infrastructure such as aviaries, cages, and fencing etc. are not covered by insurance as they are not deemed to be permanent structures leaving carers in the position that these need to be paid for themselves or donated.
- (v) Private land owners, farmers, land managers, national parks officers and the general community should be encouraged to engage with their local wildlife rehabilitation network with a view to identify and map recovery of bushland and fauna species sightings.
- (vi) Aerial 1080 baiting programs in national parks that have been significantly impacted by fire, for the purpose of eliminating feral exotic predators and native dingoes, should be put on-hold as it is impossible to ensure or monitor whether starving native wildlife, in desperation, may be consuming baits in the absence of natural foods in barren landscapes.
- (vii) Wildlife carers (and indeed entire communities) require assistance in dealing with the mental health issues that may result when coping with the grief and trauma of having one's life threatened, being evacuated, losing one's home and property and financial pressures. Many people, not just wildlife carers, are still living in properties/homes that are in ruins. Many are also grief-stricken at the amount and extent of forests and wildlife lost in these fires. It has been an absolute holocaust in the true sense of the word for wildlife and many areas will simply never be the same as there are no surviving animals in adjoining areas to repopulate.

Finally, I would like to highlight that as far as I am aware this inquiry may not have been well circulated amongst the wildlife rehabilitation sector and many carers are still dealing with the physical, financial and emotional devastation

and aftermath of these fires. Many are still displaced, have lost their homes and/or wildlife rehabilitation infrastructure, and are continuing as best they can with feeding and water programs for the handfuls of wildlife that have survived these fires.

A second crisis, Covid-19, has now occurred in the past 6 weeks, meaning rebuild projects on carers properties have now had to be postponed, feeding and water station programs have become difficult to manage, and in similar vein the emergency triage centres. The wildlife rescue sector has had to change the way it does business in the past 6 weeks to ensure social distancing and hygiene protocols are upheld whilst rescuing animals from members of the public or when visiting veterinary clinics. I would therefore ask that when reading this submission consideration be given to many others who may not have had the opportunity to submit. I feel sure a number would concur with some of the points I have made.

In summary, the lack of planning or assistance by government for wildlife in this type of disaster is not only an animal welfare issue but also speaks as to how our government views and values our native forests, fauna and indeed our volunteers. Australia has had a world leading extinction rate for decades, matched only in recent times by our deforestation and land clearing rates. It is apparent from the response of both the local and international community throughout this crisis that our forests and wildlife are indeed highly valued. In acknowledgement of this I would ask the government assist the wildlife rehabilitation sector by including them in future emergency response and incident management planning and by also providing some of the necessary resources and support to not only the wildlife sector but also to national parks to protect these irreplaceable and unique biological assets and to align with the wishes of wider community.

## **Terms of Reference (optional)**

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The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#).

## **Supporting documents or images**

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